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Private citizens hit the ocean with researchers as they study dolphin life

Daily Breeze - Torrance, Calif.
Author: Melissa Heckscher **DAILY BREEZE Photos by Robert Casillas**
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SATURDAY

What is the meaning of life? A good answer might earn you \$10,000 from a new Web site. South Bay residents offer some possibilities.

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Rated T for Teen

For PC

Grade:

A-It was 2 1/2 hours before the first faraway splashes appeared on the horizon. Peering through binoculars and scanning for distant dorsal fins, retired insurance salesman and longtime bird hobbyist Todd McGrath was the first to see them.

"It's hard to tell, but I'm pretty sure those are dolphins," he said.

The excitement was palpable as the boat turned, churning toward its target with a 10-person hodgepodge of researchers, photographers and volunteers shuffling to get a good view.

"Yeah, those are definitely dolphins," McGrath said again, still watching the water through his lenses as the boat drew closer. "We're right on course."

For the record, McGrath is a birdwatcher, not a scientist. But on this day, he may as well be a biologist thanks to a ride-along program run by the Ocean Conservation Society of Southern California, which lets anyone who's interested join the research team -- albeit just for a day.

"Any extra set of eyes helps," said Joanna Arlukiewicz, 28, a graphic designer who has been a researcher on staff with the Ocean Conservation Society for six years. "We don't try to force you to help, but we try to give the guests a reasonable workload."

Founded in 1998 by marine biologist Maddalena Bearzi and her husband, Charlie Saylan, the Ocean Conservation Society was established to foster a better understanding of the animals that live along the Southern California coast, including several species of dolphins (bottlenose dolphins, short-beaked common dolphins and long-beaked common dolphins, among others), whales, turtles, sea lions and sea birds.

Since its founding, the team has acquired a steady crew of researchers, all of whom have backgrounds or degrees in biology.

The work is unpaid, and most of the 20 or so researchers do it to gain field experience so they can potentially continue a career in marine biology or ecology.

The ride-along program, in contrast, doesn't require a scientific background. It is open to anyone who is willing to pay \$75 and who wants to spend a day at sea looking for and observing marine animals.

"The more you can get the public out to see how research is done, the more you're going to come out with an understanding of the environment," Arlukiewicz said. "You see Discovery Channel, for instance -- I think a lot of people would want to know, 'How do they know that?'"

Arlukiewicz, who helps out several times per month in addition to doing Web design and marketing for the project, said the ride-along program helps nonscientists better understand the scientific method.

"When you go whale-watching, you're really just looking at the aesthetics -- and that's fine," she said. "But to be able to really understand these things really opens your appreciation for them."

Many of the ride-along volunteers, such as Elin Holmberg of Torrance, already have some knowledge and appreciation for the animals but are just looking for an opportunity to learn more.

"I had this degree in biology that I never did anything with," said Holmberg, 53, who works as a technical writer for Honda Motor Co. "This just kind of satisfied the inner biologist in me.

"You could spend \$75 just for a regular boat ride," she added. "For this, I'll gladly spend the money."

The expedition leaves Marina del Rey at 7 a.m. and lasts from five to nine hours, depending on the project. The course follows the coastline up to around Point Dume, where a massive underwater canyon a few miles offshore pushes nutrients toward the surface and attracts scores of fish. The fish, in turn, attract the dolphins, making for almost guaranteed sightings.

"We see dolphins 99 percent of the time," Bearzi said. "

The research is designed to explore the symbiotic relationship between marine mammals, specifically dolphins and sea lions.

"Are the dolphins following the sea lions or are the sea lions following the dolphins?" Bearzi asked.

The husband and wife team are also trying to figure out how birds fit into the picture. Gulls and other birds are often found swarming above areas where dolphins are feeding.

"We're the only people studying marine mammals in the Santa Monica Bay," said Bearzi, who is originally from Italy. "When I moved here, I thought, in a city like L.A., where you see dolphins close to shore, it was weird nobody was studying them."

As the only researchers of their kind in the area, some of their work has been published in scientific journals. They also work with the American Cetacean Society and do presentations for local schools.

The ride-along program was started recently to help offset growing project costs, including research equipment, lab work, and rent on the Marina Del Ray space where their 50-foot sailboat, "Gone with the Wind," is docked.

Volunteers are encouraged to help the researchers take observations, which are all inputted into an onboard laptop computer. In addition, researchers take note of their surroundings, including water conditions, wind speed, cloud cover, nearby fish and plant life -- even trash floating in the water.

"Everything is so interconnected," Bearzi said. "EVERYTHING YOU see in the water is a sign that something is going on."

Despite the occasional layer of smog resting on the horizon and the ocean swells that often wash up unwanted debris, Bearzi said she wants to make sure people understand that the Santa Monica Bay is teeming with life.

"You can find all different species of dolphins and whales here," she said. "There are so many different kinds of animals."

But that's not really hard to believe. Not when there are hundreds of dolphins splashing around you, their streamlined bodies scattered as far as the eye can see.

"I've never seen so many dolphins," Holmberg said after watching an army of dolphins swim so close to the boat she could have reached down and touched one.

"Usually, you go out in a boat and people are like, 'Oh look, there's a dolphin.' But to be right next to them. ... It's magical."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Founded in 1998 by marine biologist Maddalena Bearzi and her husband, Charlie Saylan, the Ocean Conservation Society was established to foster a better understanding of the animals that live along the Southern California coast, including several species of dolphins (bottlenose dolphins, short-beaked common dolphins and long-beaked common dolphins, among others), whales, turtles, sea lions and sea birds.

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